

Blood Donations Needed During Winter

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PORTSMOUTH, Va. (NNS) -- Every year, from the holiday season until warm spring days, blood supplies run critically low at military and civilian hospitals. Winter weather can affect the logistics of holding a blood drive, and fewer people make the time to donate blood.

Naval Medical Center Portsmouth's blood program is one of those affected, where on some days in January and February, only a few people are scheduled to donate at the Apheresis Center.

NMCP's mobile blood team collects most of the donations NMCP needs by visiting commands throughout Hampton Roads several times a week, where their goal is to collect at least 30 to 40 units at each stop.

"I'm O negative, so I know that that blood can be used for anyone," said Information Systems Technician 2nd Class Jessica Rasmussen, who's stationed aboard the amphibious dock landing ship USS Tortuga (LSD 46) and recently donated on the mobile van. "I've donated about 15 times now. I do it because I know people need it. You're really saving lives by donating."

Between the mobile van and the Apheresis Center, the monthly goal is 500 whole blood units. Platelet donations can be made in the Apheresis Center, where the monthly goal is 60 platelet units. During this time of year, usually about 400 units total are collected. "We are always trying to meet our goals so we don't have to take away from inventory from another military facility or have to purchase from an outside civilian agency," said Lt. Colleen Cordrick, Blood Donor Center division officer. "When we don't reach our collection goals, we reach out to other military facilities first of all using the Blood Management Tool.

"We post our needs on that website, and then other military facilities, if they have an excess of blood, they can send us products we can use," Cordrick said. "If we can't fulfill that way, we do work with the American Red Cross and another civilian agency, called the National Blood Exchange, to try to obtain units."

According to Cordrick, a typical platelet unit costs \$600 from a civilian agency, while whole blood units range from \$285 to \$400 depending on the blood type.

NMCP is one of 22 Armed Services Blood Program donor locations. The units collected also support Langley hospital, as well as overseas theater operations.

"The Armed Services Blood Program tries to be self-sufficient and not seek blood products from other sources," said Ralph Peters, the blood donor recruiter who sets up the mobile van schedule. "Donations are voluntary, so we try to help them understand the urgency of the need for blood products, so we can have them on the shelf ready to go when patients need them."

Units must be on hand during surgical procedures in case a patient loses blood and needs a transfusion in the operating room. Units are also needed for patients with cancer, autoimmune diseases and other conditions that require them to receive regular blood transfusions. Children receive transfusions in the Pediatric Infusion Center, while adult patients get them in the Ambulatory Infusion Center.

Retired Army 1st Sergeant Oliver Walmon has been diagnosed with myelodysplastic syndrome, which means his bone marrow does not make enough healthy blood cells. He receives transfusions in the AIC every two weeks.

"It's life-saving and I couldn't do without it," Walmon said. "I really appreciate anybody who's giving that blood, because I found out I need it and a lot of people need it."

While on active duty, Walmon donated blood frequently, motivated by the thought of children with leukemia and other cancer patients. Doctors have told Walmon he would not be able to donate again, but he wishes he could.

Chief Navy Counselor (SW) Katrina Bradford donates as often as she can. It's one way she gives back to the medical system that supports her son who was diagnosed with sickle cell disease when he was born. Her son is now 15 and has received monthly transfusions for about a decade.

"If it wasn't for the donors, what would we do?" Bradford said. "So they are very important." her son, Keshawn, agrees.

"I'm really grateful for (them), because if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be here today," said Keshawn, while he was receiving a transfusion. He said he'd rather be playing basketball or playing trumpet with his high school marching band instead of coming to the medical center for care. But he considers that the blood donations are "really a blessing."

Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class (SW) Lindsay Gray, the donor center leading petty officer, encourages others to donate and help them meet demand. She has donated about a dozen times.

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"If you think about the end result of saving someone's life, a simple stick of the needle and the time it takes to donate should not deter you at all," Gray said. "The time it takes for whole blood is about an hour. The majority of the time is administrative - we have to make sure that you are able to donate blood. Your hemoglobin has to be at least 12.5, and we do an interview, which is the most time-intensive part. The blood donation part takes only about 10 minutes."

Donors can give either whole blood or platelets. Platelet donation can take an hour to an hour and a half, since the platelets are collected by a machine and the remaining blood components are returned to the donor. Platelet donations can be made every 14 days, while whole blood donations can be made every 57 days.

Those interested in donating whole blood or platelets at NMCP's Apheresis Center can call (757) 953-1717 to make an appointment. Commands interested in scheduling the mobile van can call (757) 953-1686.

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